

## **The unfamiliarity of a familiar place**

It is mid-June, and I am writing this from my university office, not waiting for the cells to grow this time, but waiting for a major system update on a server to finish.

It is the first time I have been here for months. Our work on COVID-19 meant that the relevant parts of the team have always had Essential Worker status, and therefore permission to be here when necessary, but all of our electronic systems have behaved themselves, so there has been no need to exercise these 'rights'. Working from home was clearly the responsible thing to do, so we did.

We are still in pretty-much full lockdown; Scotland is coming to the end of its 'phase 1' of emerging, but that phase made no difference to non-essential work; most shops are closed and people can meet only outside and with full social distancing. The measures have worked well, infection and death rates have been falling for seven weeks now, and we have had a few days of no COVID-19 deaths at all. But the virus is still here, and there is no room for complacency so this is very much a one-off visit before another long period working from home.

And what a strange mix of the familiar and unfamiliar this is! The city itself, which would in a normal year now be gearing up for the Festival, is very quiet and there was only one other vehicle in the university car park. The building was its usual self on the outside but, on entering, I found the usually welcoming reception desk protected by high perspex screens and, of course, unmanned. The out-of-hours book, now operative 24/7, showed that a few people had been in, but the place was oddly quiet and had that smell that concrete buildings acquire with long periods of undisturbed air. My office looked just as I left it, but was peculiarly silent. The first thing I did was wind up my clock, a late 1940s wooden model made very cheaply by Metamec, the loud tick-tock of which really irritates one of my students whenever she comes in. She has said many times she would find it intolerable but, for me, hearing it again made the room seem friendlier and more welcoming, and the world a lot more normal. And it feels so good to be surrounded by my books - during the months at home I have so missed the convenience of being able to reach for a book that I know contains what I am looking for. Of course, they will have to remain here when I go in a few minutes (there are hundreds - a typical old-school academic's office; group those words as you wish. Really, it is not an office at all, but a re-purposed store room. There is indeed an amusing contrast between the small office I have now, as a professor, and the first one I had as a junior lecturer in the old

Department of Anatomy, which was large enough to have not only a desk but also a coffee-table, two arm chairs and a drinks cabinet! That space has now been converted to two offices and a corridor, and the old Anatomy Professor's office is now a tutorial room for up to 45 students; *Tempora mutantur, nos et mutamur in illis*).

I have of course been paying attention to plans for how our current building will re-open. It will have limited occupancy at first, for the highest priority lab work only (eg final year PhD students doing their last experiments for a thesis, final-year post-docs doing the last things for a paper and so on). Correctly, in my view, Edinburgh is putting the needs of the young, for whom one paper can make a world of difference, ahead of those who already have secure faculty positions and are anyway very busy planning online and hybrid teaching for next year. Everything will be run in shifts, with arrival times planned to avoid crowding in corridors, there will be one-way systems with signage all over the place, and the maximum occupancies of rooms will be a major factor in planning experiments.

Although the COVID-19 lockdown has been going on for months, I am in a sense sitting in the last days of the pre-lockdown building. It is still innocent of signs and separation systems, and with only a few things like the perspex at reception to make it look at all different from the rest of its half-century of existence. It is a large concrete building that nobody could call pretty, and its presence in George Square is a piece of architectural vandalism the like of which I hope we never see again. I had never thought I would feel even slightly sentimental about it. But, sitting here in a silence relieved only by a loud clock and a chattering hard drive, I am surprised to find that I do. I feel lucky to be able to take a last look before friendly normality is eclipsed by risk mitigation measures that may be with us for months.

That said, the chance to get some lab work going again in a few weeks is very exciting. Our forced separation from the bench has allowed everyone to think very hard about the best and most important experiments to do. I hope that this will turn out to be a real positive feature of what has otherwise been a period of frustration. In a busy place with deadlines coming up all the time, thinking is often eclipsed by doing. Having had real time to think we might, in the long run, end up getting further, faster than if we had never stopped. If that turns out to be the case, then we need to take care to make this time, even in a more normal world.

The drive has stopped chattering, and the system seems stable. Time to go home, and to wonder how long it will be before another one of these pieces has a sign-off saying 'Edinburgh'.

Jamie Davies, Edinburgh, June 2020